

Aidan Giesser
HI 244
Prof. Inga Kim Diederich

Aidan Giesser: Hello, my name is Aidan Giesser. Today is Friday, October 10th, 2025, and I'm interviewing.

Hyeonung Kim: Kim Hyeonung.

AG: For the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

HK: Yes.

AG: Awesome. Alright, to kick things off — H.K., could you please share a little bit about your early childhood? Where were you born, and what type of family environment were you brought up in?

HK: I was born in Ilsan, South Korea, which is the south part or the southern part of Korea. I moved to Jeju Island when I was around one year old, and I stayed there until I left to the U.S. I live with my mother, and I have two siblings, one older sister and a brother, which are both older than me.

AG: Awesome. And are your siblings and your mom, are they all living in the U.S. at this time?

HK: Yeah. All of them are — But we are now separated since my sister just graduated from college.

AG: Nice... So you said you moved to Jeju Island and then you moved from Korea to the United States. What are some of your earliest memories from Korea? And what are some of your earliest memories from moving to the United States?

HK: I feel like it was too young for me to actually have a vivid memory, but I guess I was surrounded by a very lively and huge household, like living with my uncles and aunts and stuff. But once I moved to the US, it was, we were pretty isolated from that lively environment, but we did have an aunt that lives in the US which kinda gave us that Korean feeling, I guess.

AG: Nice. And how old were you when you moved to the U.S.?

HK: Around five years old.

AG: Five years old?

HK: Five to six.

AG: Got it... Sweet. And so... When you guys eventually did move to the United States, what was the reason for that decision?

HK: So my mother studied abroad in Canada during her college years, and she really enjoyed the freedom and how she felt there, compared to the more structured and competitive environment that she experienced in Korea. And she also didn't really like the Korean educational system, where in order to be successful in Korea you have to be at the top of the class and usually need to attend one of the top five universities to be hired into like the big five *Chaebol* (Large family-owned business conglomerates) corporations. Otherwise, there's a high chance that you live a 9-5 job and stuck in minimum wage. So she kind of want me to have that freedom and not be in a very structured and competitive way.

AG: Got it. And do you think that today, based on your mom's experience in Korea, that today's Korea is very similar? Like, if you were to still live there?

HK: Yeah, I'm pretty sure I heard like a lot of stories about like how students or kids around my age, they still had to go through a lot of tutoring system where to the point it was like 8 am to like 3 pm School, then like 4 pm to like 9 pm was like a club slash tutoring, and which that would just make me like super overwhelmed and overworked. So I think there's still that very competitive and structured or overworking, like study environment in Korea.

AG: Got it. Sweet. So going back to, I guess, traveling. Obviously moved to Jeju, moved to Bellevue — Bellevue was the first place you guys moved to in the United States?

HK: Yeah.

AG: And of all the cities in the United States you could have moved to — why was it Bellevue that you ended up in?

HK: It was because of my aunt. We had family or relatives living in Bellevue.

So when we first moved to the US, you know, we didn't have like a house or anything. So we stayed with them for a couple years before finding our actual house. So the reason we moved to specifically Bellevue, Washington, was because we had relatives.

AG: Nice. So did you have cousins there, too?

HK: Yeah.

AG: Are you still close with them?

HK: Yeah

AG: Nice.

HK: [Laughter]

AG: No? Similar in age to you?

HK: Yeah. They're around like twenty-eight-ish.

AG: twenty-eight?

HK: Yeah. And I'm twenty.

AG: So, how old are your siblings again?

HK: twenty-two and twenty-three.

AG: Okay, so they're not that much older than you. Your siblings?

HK: [Laughter] Wait, no. Our cousins are actually like thirty-two.

AG: Oh, so they are quite old?

HK: Yeah, because when I came here, they were already like... Graduating college.

AG: Oh, really?

HK: Yeah.

AG: So you didn't really even... Yeah. You weren't that close because they were kind of far.

HK: She only helped us.

AG: Got it. Got it. So in addition to your aunt and cousins, did you, obviously, you were too young, but did your mom maybe have any existing friends in the United States?

She didn't have any, yeah.

AG: Nobody?

HK: Nobody.

AG: Wow. But anyone in Canada?

HK: No.

AG: Wow. That must have been hard — I guess to talk about Korea for a little bit, you moved when you were very young. In addition to having that lively, familial environment in Korea. Did you have any other memories?

HK: In Korea?

AG: Yeah.

HK: I don't really think so. I don't really remember. I mean, I moved here when I was like five. So yeah, I was just getting conscious.

AG: Yeah. That makes sense. Even without the memory of directly living in Korea — Obviously, you grew up in a Korean household, so... Are there any aspects of Korean life that your family strives to keep alive in Bellevue?

HK: Yeah, my mother really wanted us to keep the Korean vocabulary and language, so she would strictly force me and my siblings to only speak Korean in our household. And she would celebrate a lot of Korean holidays, like for example, *Seollal* (Korean New Year). Which is like the Korean New Year. So she did like enforced a lot of Korean in our house and still helped us feel Korean by celebrating the Korean holidays.

AG: Yeah. And did you enjoy that?

HK: Yeah.

AG: And what were your favorite parts of it?

HK: Food.

AG: The food? [laughter]

HK: [laughter] She would cook a lot of good Korean food.

AG: Nice, so I guess now in your own life at Colby, are there any Korean communities or anything you do to keep your Korean identity alive here?

HK: I joined the Colby Korean Club, which there seems to be a more... Korean Americans than like full Koreans. So there's still like that kind of like a gap but I joined it to still stay connected with Korean so I think that's like the one thing I do.

AG: What do you feel like the biggest gap between you being born in Korea versus Korean Americans, what do you feel like the difference is?

HK: Well, I feel like the Korean Americans at Colby — They don't really understand the culture behind it or the history behind it. And they don't really speak Korean. So I think that's like the huge gap.

AG: Yeah. So like, when you talk about, they don't understand the culture. Could you be a little more specific?

HK: So they do celebrate, like... Korean holidays, but the only thing they would do is make food related to that, but they don't really understand why we're eating *Tteokguk* (Rice Cake Soup), which is like rice porridge on New Year's. I think that's kind of the difference.

AG: Through this class, we've kind of learned a lot about the really difficult history of Korea. After the Korean War, after Japan left — Do you think part of it is that maybe some Korean Americans don't understand that part of the history as well?

HK: Even I don't really understand it because I wasn't, you know, I was not living through that time. But yeah, I don't think, like even myself, I don't think I understand fully. Behind, like the actual history behind that, so I can't really say.

AG: Yeah, that makes sense. Has your mom ever really spoken about that?

HK: My mom at that time was at college in Canada. Because my mom's, our grandfather wanted her to escape that. Wait, this was like way back, you know, but like this is like when Japan left, and after like 20 years, when Korea was going through their build up, she went to Canada to learn.

AG: Wow. And what type of stuff was she studying?

HK: She was studying arts, I'm pretty sure. Like she had a music degree slash — I feel like it was one of the business -- - degree? But I don't specifically remember. I know she was a double major, though.

AG: Wow. So... Did she, do you think, because of her experiences studying abroad it made it harder at all when she ended up coming back to Korea?

HK: I, yeah, I feel like my mom. After realizing how different life was outside of Korea, she realized that — she specifically told me how bad Korea is. Or at least at the time, how bad Korea's situation was. And that was the reason. I think she had a change of mindset when she came back to Korea.

AG: And do your grandparents still live there? In Korea?

HK: Well, yeah, my grandma still lives in Seoul.

AG: Nice. And so, do you ever go back and visit her?

HK: I actually visited her this, or last summer. But she doesn't seem to remember me.

AG: [laughter] At all?

HK: [laughter] Yeah.

AG: My grandma's the same way. But, do you think, she views you in kind of an Americanized sense?

HK: So not my grandma, but my other aunt and uncles that knew me before. There was definitely, they kind of saw me more American because I didn't, really, I didn't fully know the language that they were speaking, so there were still language barriers. And I think that made me, and the way that I acted and the way I looked, like obesity and stuff and being fat. It was kind of like a shock to them.

AG: Yeah. Interesting. Were they, like, mean about that?

HK: They were mean about it. I mean, I explained, like, I did, like, sports. So then they understood how a lot of people took sports pretty seriously compared to sports in Korea.

AG: Yeah, they must have been shocked about you playing American football.

HK: Yeah.

AG: Yeah, so I guess like... Now transitioning to you, like growing up in America, what was it like in, did you go to public schools? private schools?

HK: So, I mean, coming to America with like no background knowledge, I was like put into ESL, which is English as a second language program, and where I got help learning and getting assimilated into American culture. And I would go to two separate schools, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. And the morning is where I learned English, and the other was where I... learn like other subjects.

AG: And was it, like, were there times where you felt, like, different or there was ever any bullying or, like, ostracization?

HK: There wasn't any bullying, but I definitely felt left out since I wasn't really included in anything because again, because of the language and the cultural barriers — But eventually I became fluent in, or like, efficient. In English, to the point where I tested out of ESL, and then I was like, within the actual classroom, where I started to feel more like American or like included.

AG: Yeah, and what were some of the, well I guess the first question would be, how long did it take for you to feel like you were totally fluent in English?

HK: Since I was still a kid. Like, I wasn't really fluent in Korean or anything, that's like a hard say for me because I felt like English was my actual first language rather than Korean. But I would assume, like at the end of fifth grade. Or like elementary school, I thought English is my primary language from now on. I feel very... comfortable with English at that time.

AG: Got it. And so was it difficult going from school, speaking English, to going home and speaking Korean?

HK: It was kind of weird, but the thing is, I already knew some Korean, you know? I feel like it was weird in terms of once English became my primary language, it was kind of hard for me to not speak English in our household.

AG: And did your Mom and siblings speak English as well as you did?

HK: My sister did, but my brother did not because even though we only have like a three-year age gap, that three extra years of time in Korea that my brother you know, lived, He already was more familiar with the Korean structure and the Korean writing and listening and vocabulary and everything. So he had a harder time adjusting. To the American language compared to me where I didn't really have a full extent of knowledge of Korean.

AG: That makes sense. And your mom, did she ever speak any English or not really?

HK: She, so she didn't like the bare minimum from her time abroad in Canada. But.. she spoke very broken English, where you had to really combine everything together to fully understand what she was saying in English.

AG: And so I guess... Back to school, growing up, were there any specific parts of American life in American schools, whether it be sports or clubs that kind of helped you really assimilate into the American culture?

HK: Yeah, doing flag football in middle school and American football in high school allowed me to like I guess like find more friends and understand the American culture more. It gave me a sense of belonging and a brotherhood that I don't think I would have felt without joining sports or being in the sports team. And... I don't think there was any downside of like joining a sports team. So. Yeah, I think definitely a sports program helped me be more assimilated into the American Culture.

AG: Yeah. Were you as strong and big in high school as you were in college?

HK: No. [Laughter] No, I was like big, but I got pushed back by this D3 recruit that pushed me back 20 yards down the field. [laughter]

AG: Oh my god. [laughter]

HK: So it wasn't fun. [laughter]

AG: You probably would have handled him today, though.

HK: No. He's probably bigger now.

AG: So I guess, like, on those teams and things, were you usually the only Korean or even the only Asian kid?

HK: Actually, like, Bellevue, Washington, or like, just like Washington in general, like the... The West side. Surprisingly has a higher Asian population, and the school I went to had a lot of Asian population. It was around 60% Asian. So... I had a lot of Asian friends in football too.

AG: So would you ever speak Korean with them or appreciate how you had similar cultures?

HK: Yeah, they're more Korean American, and they were raised or they were born in the US, and then they didn't really speak Korean that much, but like the basics that we would speak some Korean to each other.

AG: So, the broader Korean community in Bellevue was pretty strong?

HK: I wouldn't say like a Korean community, but like the Asian community was pretty strong.

AG: So was that a mix of all like Eastern Asian countries?

HK: Yeah, like Filipinos, Vietnamese. We had a lot of Asians — like Chinese, Japanese.

AG: And did you feel like I don't know, like, obviously in the history, like, the Koreans and the Japanese haven't always got along - Do you feel like you guys just kind of had being Asian in common and you guys kind of united over that?

HK: Yeah, I feel like... I didn't really see or I didn't really I feel like compared to people Koreans in their 80s in Korea They will like not be friends with like any Japanese people because like they experienced what was actually happening But like for me as like a newer generation where like that was a in the past even though it was like still fairly recent I didn't really think of the history behind that, and I don't think that really affected me. Like for example, to be friends with a Japanese guy because of their ancestors' past. I don't really think so.

AG: Got it. How do you think that the Korean and broader Asian community in Bellevue or even in Western Washington in general might differ from other hubs of Koreans of the United States, like in Los Angeles or New York or Boston?

HK: Yeah, I feel like those major city places they definitely do have like a larger Korean population and communities like Korean Town, where people can easily be like more immersed

into the Korean culture, but like Bellevue really doesn't have like a specific Koreatown. So maybe I did have like a harder time feeling connected to the Bellevue region.

AG: Do they have good Korean restaurants at least?

HK: They do, yeah. There's like Federal Way, Washington, where there is a Korean town there where I can go into and I would still probably feel like that, like the same way that I would feel if I were to be in like Boston or like LA Korean town.

AG: And was there... Was there ever a religious component to your Korean identity? Like, did you grow up religious at all?

HK: Yeah, so... So my mom's a Buddhist and we went to a Buddhist temple in Federal Way, like the Korean town. And it was like a Korean Buddhist temple, and that's where we felt most, or at least my mom felt most connected with the Korean culture, considering there were more people her age.

AG: So that was a good way for her to find community. Were there any other communities that helped you find a sense of belonging? You've kind of touched on a lot of them.

HK: I don't know. I mean, maybe like my friends' families or my family friends, no, my friends' family because some of them are Asian too, so like my mom would talk to them. And like, yeah, I guess I get more used to the American culture, but other than that, not really.

AG: All right. And I guess to kind of speak a little more about your siblings and your parent relationships. How did you feel that your relationships with your siblings shaped your experience growing up in the US?

HK: I feel like it definitely helped to have my siblings go through the same challenges as me. Because I always knew I wasn't alone, like learning English or having difficulties being part of American culture. So I could always ask my family for help. And I think having siblings who also experience those with me made everything a little easier and made me feel less alone while adjusting to American life.

AG: Totally. I have two siblings, so I know three siblings can be a lot. Do you feel like your mom had a kind of different level of expectations for each one of you? Like she was maybe harder on the oldest, easiest on you, being the youngest?

HK: I feel like she was hardest on my brother because he did have the hardest time learning English and getting used to it like, as I mentioned before, and I think that's because he already was very used to the Korean culture, but then he got pulled out of it.

AG: And why do you think your sister was able to kind of succeed there in a different way where your brother wasn't as much?

HK: Even though my sister and my brother has like a one-year age gap, I think the major difference was my sister was very enthusiastic about learning American culture and Korean culture. So I think she, really focused on American culture at the same time, like the Korean side of her, so I think that just might be due to a different passion.

AG: And you said your sister graduated last year. And she went to Columbia, right? So was it... Obviously, Columbia, a really good school. She probably had really good grades, I'm imagining. Was that ever hard to compare to?

HK: Like to my brother or to me?

AG: For you. I mean, like, I know what it was like sometimes when my older brother would get better grades than me and my mom would compare me to him a little bit.

HK: I don't know how this is part of the interview [laughter]. If I were to compare me and my sister, like, she's just, like, a different level.

AG: Yeah?

HK: Yeah.

AG: What did she study?

HK: She did neuroscience.

AG: Wow, and you're studying?

HK: Biology.

AG: Wow, got it. So, I guess back to your mom. You talked a little bit about her adapting, but... Just generally speaking, what was it like watching your mother adapt to life in America, especially considering her language barrier?

HK: Yeah, I feel like at the start, like, when I didn't know anything about American culture, watching my mom adapt to life in America, honestly, made me kind of admire her. Because even though like, English, but she didn't really know fully, you know, but she still like didn't hesitate to ask questions or try to speak in English and I feel like the way that she learned English and like picked it up fairly faster was pretty amazing because, she picked things up through everyday situations like talking to teachers or going to grocery stores and just talking to random people. I think seeing her determination and confidence. It made me realize how to also try to communicate or go out of my boundary to talk to new people in America or in English. So, yeah.

AG: That's awesome. And I know... I know obviously with you speaking amazing English now, I remember you talking to me earlier about how sometimes you will help her with more serious stuff when a high degree of English is necessary. You want to talk about that at all?

HK: Yeah, I feel like, well, as I said before, just like, since I really didn't know Korean, as well. And English was my primary language... I started to after I became more fluent in English, I started to become the one to help my mom and my brother. For example, filling out forms or doing emails for them, or translating for them. Even though I was the youngest, me having an easier time adjusting to the American culture helped us bridge the gap. I guess between my family and the new American culture that we have to go through.

AG: And do you think your sister played a similar role in that as well?

HK: Yeah, I think it was always me and my sister helping my mom and my brother, I'm after that. I think my sister had like the — She definitely helped us translate and do those things first, but then after I started picking up English. I was able to be better at translating English.

AG: Got it, and today, with, I guess, you and your siblings kind of spread out around the country, and your mom's still in Bellevue. How do you think I don't know what type of other challenges versus opportunities do you think your mom will have now? Like kind of as far as immersion?

HK: I feel like we are kind of done with that. I feel like — It's kind of hard to say because we're all going separate lives. So... I don't really know for that one.

AG: Yeah, I know. Growing up is weird. Do you envision you and all your siblings will stay in different cities? Or do you see you guys all moving back to Bellevue?

HK: So my brother is actually living with my mom at the moment, but my sister wants to stay on the East Coast, but I don't know what I'm gonna do after I graduate, but I kind of want to go back to the West Coast. So yeah, we're gonna be separated, I believe.

AG: Got it. And do you think... in your future is med school?

HK: Med, grad, or masters, yeah.

AG: Well, there are a lot of good programs on the West Coast. There's also a lot in Boston. You should think about Boston, dude.

HK If you host me. [laughter]

AG: I could. You might have to pay rent, though. [laughter]

AG: Yeah, so you have, I know you go down to Boston sometimes to like to see friends. Are those mostly friends from Bellevue?

HK: Yeah, they're friends from my high school — and some of them are Asian, some of them are white and Korean. I just see them because they're just my friends.

AG: Yeah. And they... let me think about how to ask this.... There's obviously a stronger Asian community in the Boston area than there is in Waterville. Do you ever wish you went to a school like that?

HK: I do sometimes wish that Boston, like Allston in Boston, or in Massachusetts, I think it would have been nicer because then I feel like H-Mart, where I could buy Korean food and stuff — That would honestly make me feel more connected to Korean culture. So sometimes I do wish I went to a... Bigger city or like it like just like a city in general, where I could be more immersed in a community. I like the community.

AG: Yeah. I hear you. H Mart is awesome. That whole Alston area, I go there. Have you ever been to Shabu-zen? It's fire hot pot.

HK: Anyways, at the same time, I'm glad I don't live in Boston. Because I know I won't have any money anymore. [laughter]

AG: Do you, as far as the Asian community at Colby? Do you feel like you guys, obviously, you're in the Korean club — Do you feel like there's a shared sense of belonging there, or do you think that Colby could do more to, like, support the Asian Community?

HK: I feel like there isn't, like, I'm pretty sure, like, if I remember correctly, there's only, like, 10% of Asians there at Colby, and we are in like Maine which is like you know, historically like

the lowest percentile of like Asians. I think Colby actually does a pretty good job being like — at least like the clubs in Colby, they did a pretty good job like making a good community.

AG: And for an additional question, how do your Korean speaking abilities make you feel connected to your Korean heritage?

HK: Yeah, because I can speak Korean, I think I'm able to participate in a lot of Korean traditions and cultural practices in a way that feels genuine in a way. And I feel like speaking Korean allows me to connect with my heritage, rather than feeling like an outsider, trying to fit in with the Korean society. But at the same time, my relationship — my relation to Korea, seems pretty complicated, because since I moved away from Korea before fully understanding *Hangul* (Korean Alphabet), which is like the Korean alphabet, and since most of my Korean language developed from watching Korean TV shows and dramas, it just feels like my Korean kind of sounds unnatural in a way.

AG: Got it, and so with that — how do you think your Korean speaking abilities uniquely position you between Korean and American cultures?

HK: Yeah, just like what I said, because my Korean kind of sounds unnatural. And I mean by like because I don't really know like this, like the slangs or like the abbreviations that a fluent native Korean would say, I feel like that makes me kind of feel less Korean, even though the Korean language is still a core part of who I am. And since I grew up in an American environment, I feel like I absorb a lot of those American cultures in many ways that, like, my identity blends between Korean and American, but most of the case, it feels like I'm more part of the American culture compared to my Korean side. Like, for an example — two years ago, I visited Korea and I asked a worker a question. I was, like, probably ordering like a menu at a restaurant, and somehow the worker already instantly recognized that I wasn't really from Korea, even though I'm Korean, and he said something along the lines of, “you're not from here”. And in that moment, I realized that me being Korean and still having a Korean identity doesn't always translate the same way that I expected, because even though I see myself as a Korean, like native Koreans, sometimes perceive me as a foreigner, or somehow like different compared to them. So I feel like my Korean language ability connects me to my heritage, but it also shows the complexities of being part of the Korean diaspora. And I just feel like I belong to both cultures, but not completely to either, and my Korean speech often becomes like the marker of like, that complex identity.

AG: Awesome. Well. HK, thank you so much for your time. It's been wonderful getting to engage in this conversation with you.

HK: Yeah. Thank you, Aidan, thank you.

